

My father-in-law, Charles Huttar, is on my mind on this Advent Sunday dedicated to Joy. Joy was his wife's name. Joy required a lot of care in her later years, having given much to seven children and many others. So Charles was especially attentive to Joy in the years before she died. He's 89 now, and since having a stroke last year, lives in a care facility in Western Michigan. Life isn't easy when you're a big man and you only have use of one side of your body, need help transferring from bed to wheelchair and back. Charles tested positive for Covid just before getting the booster. Recovered, thank God.

But every time I visit, I come away with a feeling of joy that I catch from him. He's a retired English professor who grew up in fundamentalism (married the daughter of the President Moody Bible) then slid down the slippery slope and landed as an affirming Episcopalian. His joy moments often come when he's quoting a poem (GM Hopkins is a favorite) or a hymn. Which happens frequently. I've seen it so many times. His face flushes, eyes mist up, and then when he hits the line that moves him, it's like a Spring shower with the sun shining, as he arrives at the border between laughter and tears. It passes quickly, and he's on to another topic.

If you asked Charles what joy is, he'd answer as the C.S. Lewis Scholar he is. (Lewis, a 20th Century Oxford Prof, is famous for Chronicles of Narnia children's books.) Charles, like Lewis, would be quick to distinguish between happiness, pleasure, and joy. He would understand joy as a mystical thing—something that visits us in this world from beyond this world. He would see joy as a manifestation of a benevolent Higher Power. Joy was there in beginning and is the thing waiting for us as Julian of Norwich, the 14th Century mystic said—*All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.* (Lewis, late in life, married a woman named Joy.)

These distinctions Lewis made—joy is different than happiness is different than pleasure—I don't know. Do things really come in separate containers like that? But the intuition that there's something special about joy, that it's a hint from the universe about things far beyond us, a mystical thing—*that* I can see on my father-in-law's face, and I find it compelling.

In ancient Judaism, which Jesus and his earliest followers were part of, before something called Christianity insisted on being its own separate thing, joy is the distinctive mark of the Spirit—along with love, joy is the most enduring and reliable trait of divine presence. Paul, whose writings precede the gospels by a few decades, expressed this ancient tradition, when he wrote, ***“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”*** [not control of others, self-control] The word for fruit (Gk., *karpos*) is singular, as if Spirit forms a single unit composed of various aspects: love and joy as co-leaders on the list. I bring up this text, not to break into “I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart” but to say joy as manifestation of Spirit reflects the mystical understanding of joy that is a hallmark of ancient Judaism, and I'm guessing other traditions as well. Religious people are known by their scowls, holy people are known by their smiles.

We probably have a vestige of this in the Advent wreath, where week three, the joy candle, gets a different color to signify there is something special about joy. Because joy signifies something about the universe.

The main words for joy appear 400 times in the Hebrew Bible. Hebraic thought is concrete not abstract; earthy and mystical, practical and sublime, at the same time. Just to summarize the range of joy in this tradition:

- Though Joy is associated with God very closely (*in your presence is fulness of joy*, says the psalmist) and joy is a mark of the Spirit, in our experience joy is ephemeral, inconstant, like the weather: *“Even in laughter the heart may ache and joy may turn to grief”* (Proverbs 14:13) There are, I think, more psalms expressing absence of joy than presence of joy.
- Jesus along with many others in ancient Judaism, associates joy with the world to come. Here’s one from Isaiah: *“For in joy you shall go out, and in peace you shall be led. The mountains and hills shall burst forth in glad song before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”* (Is. 12) So rejoicing, feasting, dancing, sitting under one’s own fig tree, olive oil and wine in abundance, is what’s happening in the age to come. Another way to say it: even if joy is not in our present, it’s definitely in our future.

But the world or the age to come, in Jewish thought always has a present manifestation —as though joy is rushing from the future into our present.

- So joy has a paradoxical dimension, it can come in moments of affliction—Hebrews says that *“for the joy set before him”* Jesus *“endured the cross.”* I understand this as Jesus, in a time of affliction, having a mystical sense of joy from the future rushing toward him.
- Another example of joy as a mystical thing: All created things participate in Joy. So the psalms are littered with image like this: *let the rivers clap their hands! Let the mountains sing gladly! The sea creatures and the great Leviathan God fashioned to play with.*

We could say every living thing—from fungus strands surrounding and connecting the roots of trees, to the chemical-electrical transmission happening between nerve cells in our bodies—is marked by a joyful exuberance. Molecules in constant motion, in turn composed of atoms in constant interaction— On any given day or any given hour, sometimes for entire seasons, we lose touch with the joyful exuberance, but at the cellular level, it’s happening.

If Joy signifies something about Ultimate Reality ... as my father-in-law believes and practices, then we could seek to be extra attentive to Joy.

We can notice moments of joy. In yourself. In others. In puppies, in birds, in trees.

On NPR! I heard people who take smart phone pictures of their food, enjoy it more, as a result.

The taking of the picture is an act of noticing. [Dropped an egg, caught it with my shoes]

One of my favorite little books is *The Book of Delights* by Ross Gay (University of Indiana) After the 2016 election, he was downcast, so he assigned himself to notice a moment of delight every day for a year and write a short essay about it. It's on audiobook too. I've read it twice, going for a third time—at bedtime. Tunes me into daily delights.

Notice, in order to *linger over moments of joy*. Take them in when they are happening. If I can mention a moment of delight to someone else, so much the better.

When the Joy Fairy goes into hiding for a spell, we can **call to mind a moment of** delight.

Wrapping up: I have a friend; I'll assign him the name Fred. Fred, like Charles Huttar, like CS Lewis, has a partner whose actual name is Joy. Fred and Joy were facing a challenging situation together. Fred was talking to his sister about it: what to do? Best approach? His sister, knowing Fred's areas of expertise/wisdom and Joy's areas of expertise/wisdom—said to him, "What's the problem? Just trust joy." This came like a new insight, and he thought, "that makes perfect sense."

When I heard that, I thought, that's deep: JUST TRUST JOY. When I see the look that comes over my father-in-law's face, when I feel it myself from time to time, or in a dry season, remember such a thing exists, and whether it seems nearby or faraway, it is awaiting us...I can learn to relax into it, to just trust joy. Because Joy is signifying something: **"all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well"**

